

Review “Children learn languages quickly and easily while adults are ineffective in comparison”

Título: Review “Children learn languages quickly and easily while adults are ineffective in comparison”. **Público:** Maestros Educación Primaria. **Materia:** Inglés, Educación Bilingüe. **Autor:** Molina Antomas, Ainoa (Maestra Educación Primaria Mención Inglés, Máster Orientación Educativa).

Recibido 2015-10-06; Aceptado 2015-10-14; Publicado 2015-11-25

1. INTRODUCTION

We all have heard the theory that children are able to learn certain skills faster than adults. Is that assumption real? And if so, what is the reason why?

On the one hand, children are considered very good learners. It is true that their motivation is high; therefore, they enjoy learning, but their environment is also a big motivating factor to take into account. On the other hand, adults are supposed to be “poorer” learners. However, they can build on skills and experiences as well as they can organize their learning better.

In this essay, we are trying to discover whether all this is fact or fiction, trying to understand children and adults’ ability to learn.

There is an enormous variety of researches, books, information and opinions about the age’s influence in the second language acquisition, but we have selected the ones that we think are more explicative. Specifically, we are going to focus our interest in some of the most important theories about the differences of success at learning a new foreign language depending on different age levels, within three points of view: neurological, cognitive and affective. Finally, we will explain the variety of accent and pronunciation depending on the age of the learners.

2. DISCUSSION

We would like to start this composition by exploring the variety of success at learning a new foreign language depending on different age levels. In order to do this, we will divide opinions, researches and theories within three different points of view: neurological, cognitive and affective.

First of all, in the *neurological* point of view, we find the Critical Period Hypothesis (Lenneberg, 1967) that defines a critical period of neurological development during which the brain demonstrates maximum plasticity and, therefore, maximum potential for development. In other words, they think that it becomes difficult to learn a language in adolescence, or later when we are adults, because those parts of the brain which are responsible for language learning become fixed (Lenneberg, 1967). Hence, one prediction of this hypothesis is that second language acquisition will be relatively fast, successful, and qualitatively similar to first language only if it occurs before the age of puberty (Krashen 1975; Lenneberg 1967, 1969; Scovel 1969). However, there is a research about the first year of learning Dutch of some English families living in Germany which do not support the critical period hypothesis. This research concluded that the notion of younger children are better than older children or adults in second language learning must be rejected on basis of scores within the families that contributed subjects in more than one age group. In these families, parents

obtained better results than their children in all tests. Thus, maybe there is a critical period for first language acquisition ending at 5 years but predicts no necessary differences in speed or ease of second language acquisition among subjects older than 5 (Snow, Catherine and Hoefnagel-Hohle). In this case, adults were more effective than their children learning a new language.

Secondly, according to the *cognitive* point of view, early exposure to a second language is advantageous because it capitalizes on the innate language learning ability that all children seem to have. Theoretical support for this position comes from scholars such as Chomsky (1972) and McNeill (1970), who also postulate the existence of innate language learning mechanisms.

Thus, according to this point of view, early second language learning is a natural and painless way to acquire competence in a second language. They think that introducing second language instruction after early childhood would, therefore, be to fail to take into account these critical cognitive and linguistic predispositions, as stated Fred Genesee (1978). Nevertheless, we find that a few studies have shown that adults are faster than children in acquiring second language morphology and syntax (Ervin-Tripp, 1974; Fathman, 1975, Ekstrand, 1976) and listening comprehension (Asher and Price, 1967).

In addition, adults are able to discuss their learning styles and strategies in ways that children and adolescents are unable to (Cohen, 1998). Then, adults are considered to be better at manipulating abstract linguistic categories and formalizing rules and concepts, as well as it is thought that they are likely to have developed a number of learning skills and strategies which children don't have (Ur, 1996). On the other hand, some authors like Krashen (1982) consider that abstract thinking maturing entails a hard obstacle in second language learning, now that adults tend to process input through reasoning (Littlewood, 1994). Apart from that, Kennedy (1988) claims that once a subject has his/her L1 system consolidated, this knowledge will affect the LE system. So, according to Kennedy, the knowing of learning strategies and styles would be a negative factor to take into account.

Moreover, other studies (Kemper, 1992) say there are some cognitive abilities that decrease with age, such as; the working memory capacity, cognitive processing speed, encoding information or recalling details.

Furthermore, we have to keep in mind the *affective* point of view. It is thought that older learners are less successful at language learning in the long term, and one of the reasons that could explain why; it is that adult second language learners tend to have higher level of anxiety than children (Asher & García, 1969; Johnson & Newport, 1989; Oyama, 1976; Patkowski, 1980). Besides, there is an argument called "Affective purity" which affirms that young children are thought to be better second language learners because they have fewer affective predispositions which interfere with their learning. They are thought to be naive, willing recipients of the learning experience. Older students, on the other hand, are felt to have had experiences or to have formed attitudes which might jeopardize learning, especially second language learning, which is highly loaded with personal and political significance (Genesee, 1978). In view of the work by Gardner and Lambert (1972) and others, which has demonstrated the importance of attitudes in second language learning, this argument could be quite important.

Maybe the main features of children as learners are the ones which make people think they are better at second language learning. For example; they rely on other to choose what it is important to be learned, they accept the presentation of important information and they have expectations that what they are learning will be useful in their long term future while adults expect that what they are learning will be immediately useful (Naznean, 2003).

On the other hand, it is thought that adult classes tend, on the whole, to be more disciplined and cooperative; most adults are learning voluntarily and they have chosen the course themselves; consequently,

they have a clear purpose in learning (such as work, travel, etc.) so they are likely to feel more committed and motivated. Nevertheless, other studies affirm that you can raise children's motivation and enthusiasm (by selecting interesting activities) more easily than when you are working with adults (Ur, 1996). It is thought that this motivation could make them learn the new language quickly and in a more efficient way.

Finally, we have thought that it is important to add some information about the acquisition of a native-accent depending on the age you have started learning a foreign language. Some studies say that children who learn a language before adolescence are much more likely to have native-like pronunciation. However, this depends on the exposition to enough and relevant language input in the natural second language environment. Asher and García (1969), Fathman (1975), Oyama (1976) and Kennedy (1988) maintain that as soon as a subject starts to learn a foreign language, the more native-like the accent he or she develops. Lund (1999) established some reasons why adults are worse at achieving near-native pronunciation; she explains that maybe for some adults it is important to retain an accent precisely as part of a second language identity. Besides, some researchers believe that children are exposed to better input than adults - more easily understandable language that is less complex and more limited. Children have better opportunities to play with language along with people of the same age, which gives them a great deal of phonological training (Lund, 2006). On the other hand, Flege (1991) considers that adults have the ability to acquire perfectly -without accent- a new phonological system. Also, Kelz (1992) mention the existence of several cases where adults achieved a good pronunciation in LE. Lastly, Ekstrand, Snow and Hoefnagel-Hijhle (1978) found better pronunciation in older subjects, whereas Fathman (1975) and Seliger, Krashen, and Ladefoged (1975) found a negative effect of age.

3. CONCLUSION

After analysing the different points of view and researches about the impact that age has on second language acquisition, we can conclude that there is evidence for and against the fact that children are better learners than adults when they are trying to learn a second language.

Cummins (1981) distinguishes between *Cognitive academic language proficiency* and *Basic interpersonal communicative skills*. In *Cognitive academic language proficiency*, related to reading, vocabulary and morphosyntactic aspects; most of the researches have observed that adults are better learners than children. However, in *Basic interpersonal communicative skills*, related to verbal fluency and pronunciation, children are better than adults. Thus, adults learn a second language faster, particularly in grammar. On the other hand, children can achieve levels similar to a native speaker in a second language.

We can add that, although for an adult is more difficult to acquire a native level in second language, they show a faster development in the early stages (Lightbown and Spada, 2006). Due to adults cognitive maturity, for them is easier to memorize vocabulary and analyse grammatical structures. Besides, adults are able to make long sentences before children are able to do it, because of adults' conscious awareness of language and their ability to formalize linguistic rules, which make them superior than young learners in the early stages of language acquisition (Asher & Price, 1969; Fathman, 1975; Snow & Hoefnagel-Hohle, 1978).

According to the neurological point of view, we have realized that there is a time in the human development when the brain is predisposed for success in language learning (Lenneberg, 1967). Hence, according to this, because of the lateralisation of the brain, acquiring a second language becomes more difficult after puberty. The second language acquisition has to start as soon as possible to get the best results, but it is important to start when the child has acquired the mother tongue. "The distinction is neat if acquisition of the second language begins when acquisition of the first is over" (Klen, 1986). Therefore, in regard to the neurological point, we can conclude that children learn a second language easily than adults.

However, the learning process does not only depend on neurological and cognitive aspects, the affective aspect may also have consequences in second language acquisition, mainly, motivation and anxiety. Knowing if children or adults are more or less motivated or have more or less anxiety is not easy, and depends on a lot of factors. Despite the fact that our research concludes that adults have a higher level of anxiety than children, the clear purpose in learning makes them motivated. While children learn for their future, adults want to learn immediately. To sum up, children may acquire better a second language in the long term, because the learning occurs unconsciously. On the contrary, adults will get a specific knowledge of the grammatical rules but they will fail in the use of the language because the knowledge has not been integrated. So that, children learn less pressure than adults, but motivation in children could be high depending on the educator.

Besides, other important point is the accent. Most of the information extracted makes certain that people who learn a second language before puberty have native-like pronunciation. Nevertheless, it does not mean that adults cannot pronounce perfectly.

In conclusion, although there are many advantages to an early-age person for second language acquisition, there are little evidences to support the idea that adults are unable to successfully learn a second language (Brown, 1959).

4. PERSONAL OPINION

At first, we thought that children always have a higher capacity to learn a new foreign language. This belief is based on our experience as we have found people who have studied in bilingual schools or have travelled abroad; as they have received longer hours of exposition to the new language, they have a higher level of English. For that reason, when we started this research we agreed with the fact that children learn languages more easily and quickly than adults. However, after this research on the different points of view in this topic, we have realized that in some aspects, adults may be better at learning languages than children. Nevertheless, in our opinion the level of English that an adult has will depend on the context where they have learnt the new language, the input that they have received, the way they have been taught...

In conclusion, we think that nowadays we cannot compare a child and an adult without considering the atmosphere or the environment where they have developed the new language. ●

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